

FRONTLINE

A newsletter from the WA State Employee Assistance Program

Questions



How can supervisors help employees be happier at work other than through good communication, avoiding micromanaging and other supervisor-related issues that impede productivity?



We have a troubled employee with many behavioral issues who took a leave of absence from work. Lengthy absences had coworkers hoping and believing that he would not return. Unfortunately, he's back, and employees are upset. How can this issue be managed?

Answers



A quick Google search finds dozens of action steps and tips to help employees be happier at work. Supervisors can reinforce many of these tips thereby increasing their positive impact. Do your own search of “tips to be happier at work” and see how many you can find. Examples: 1) Eat healthier. (Supervisors can make healthy snacks, like fruit, available so employees are able to take advantage of healthy sources of energy in the afternoons.) 2) Exercise more. (Supervisors can model taking the stairs and/or taking walks during the day, reinforcing get-out-and-move-around behaviors.) 3) Give feedback to your supervisor/employer. (Supervisors can create efficient ways of encouraging employees to give feedback—both positive and negative—and then consider changes where appropriate.) Pride, job satisfaction, and fun at work stimulate the internal motivation of workers, so keep in mind what can contribute to these feeling-states to help employees be happier at work.



Your employee will return to work and either maintain satisfactory performance or not. If you have a history of documentation, you should continue with it, noting positive changes or continuation of the performance issues. Meet and discuss your concerns with your employee. Set standards for what you expect. Ask Talk with your employee about what, if anything, is needed from you to do the job well. If employees approach you with dismay and anger, remind them that you are fair and impartial in your supervision. Do not discuss the employee's issues. Encourage individual workers to come to you with their complaints first so you can address them rather than risk a bullying or “mobbing” of this worker by an angry group of coworkers.

Frontline Supervisor

Questions



What is “mobbing” in the workplace?



Temporary workers in our organization sometimes don’t get the respect shown to full-timers. Can you comment on the downside and associated risks of not respecting these employees?



Will EAPs see employees who come for no other reason than to complain about the boss? Won’t EAPs tell employees that they don’t handle those kinds of problems?

Answers



Mobbing refers to a group of employees bullying an individual. Whether coordinated or not, the pattern includes targeting the individual with behaviors generally considered to be harassment. These include “ganging up” on the victim in an effort to force him or her to quit or be transferred. The victim may be targeted with rumors, intimidation, humiliation, or social isolation. When discussing mobbing, these behaviors are generally not sexual or racial in their context, but their maliciousness constitutes harassment.



Temporary workers deserve the same respect as other workers in an organization, but it is easy for some employees to equate the word “temporary” with “less important,” “invisible,” and “non-person,” if only subconsciously. If this connection is made, the risk exists that temporary workers and their needs will be overlooked. This may include failure to discuss their lunch break, not letting them know where bathrooms are located, or forgetting they have to leave on time like everyone else. Temporary workers may be omitted from important staff meetings that include discussions directly relevant to their work and contributions. Temporary workers may have significant influence as they handle the affairs of a business and develop relationships with regular workers. As a supervisor, you should remind employees of the importance of temporary workers to help prevent their being treated as “second class.” You’ll realize a higher cost-benefit in their role.



Employees feel safe coming to the EAP and know their concerns will be heard without prejudice. It is therefore not unusual for employees to visit the EAP and complain about the boss. Complaining about someone else is a common means of getting help for oneself, and it makes self-referral easier. EAPs know this, so they will not tell an employee, “We don’t handle that problem.” It is always assumed that other issues exist beyond the primary complaint. These might include performance problems, personal problems, communication issues, poor coping strategies, mental health issues, and the like. Typically, employees are helped to better understand their conflicts with the boss and resolve them through better communication skills or tasks associated with personal change. If it appears that an employee is a victim of an abusive supervisor, other internal resources for resolution are discussed. Managing this type of case illustrates a priceless risk management role for EAPs, because whatever the problem, the EAP’s concern is for both the employee’s and the organization’s well-being. In nearly all cases, agitated employees voicing complaints about the supervisor are looking only to have a better relationship.